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ARE YOU A SOCIAL DRINKER?

By
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THE PENNSYLVANIA LIQUOR CONTROL BOARD

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FOREWORD

The Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board by law is required "to restrain the traffic in and use of" alcoholic beverages.

Citing this duty, there has been justifiable criticism of this Board and all Liquor Control Boards to the effect that they have failed to educate the public in regard to alcoholic beverages. The subject is so fraught with bias, prejudice and credo that even an approach to it is difficult.

The most striking effect from alcohol is its influence on the mind. We turned therefore to a prominent psychiatrist who is noted for his success in the treatment of alcoholism . . . a man whose books are standard reference works on the subject. He is Dr. Edward A. Strecker, Professor of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. MacMillan Company this month is publishing a book he has recently written on alcoholism with his associate, Mr. Francis T. Chambers . . . "Alcohol . . . One Man's Meat".

Since those who suffer from the misuse of alcohol are recruited entirely from those who were casual or social drinkers, this article should interest everyone who partakes.

HARKEY REITER
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ALCOHOL may be either a source of normal enjoyment or it may be a menace to physical and mental health and happiness. There is no doubt that, properly used, alcohol may favor social relaxation and good fellowship and may add to human pleasure. There is no doubt, too, that under certain conditions alcohol is not only a poison to the body, but also, a mental poison. When these conditions exist, the alcohol becomes dangerous and its use is extremely likely to result in ruin for the drinker and in unhappiness and misery for his family and those who are dependent upon him.

What are the conditions under which alcohol becomes a dangerous poison instead of a pleasant social drink? The first condition applies to all of us; the second only to some of us. Like everything else that we take into our bodies, alcohol is distinctly harmful if we take too much of it. Even food which is necessary to sustain life, will do harm if we overeat. Taken in large quantities and taken too constantly, alcohol not only seriously damages the body in its vital organs and structures but, even worse, it cripples the mind and sometimes destroys it.

Alcohol may cause insanity. For instance, in what is commonly known as D. T's, delirium tremens, the patient is in such a violent, fearful delirium and his brain is so poisoned by alcohol, that he may die. In another form of alcoholic insanity, the patient is insulted and tormented, often for many months, by

imaginary voices. In another variety, not only is there severe pain in the legs with wasting of the muscles so that the patient is confined to bed and unable to walk for months, but, he is also mentally deranged so that often he does not even know where he is. Sometimes, when alcohol has been heavily misused for years, the mind is completely lost forever, so that the individual who may still be comparatively young, may have to pass the remainder of his life in about the same condition as a very demented old man.

Even if none of these calamities happen, it is still true that alcohol used more or less continuously in considerable excess is very likely to dull the brightness and alertness of the mind and to impair notably business and social efficiency. It must be remembered that "more or less continuously" does not mean only constant heavy drinking, and, of course, the very excessive drinker is not free of mental dangers, because he sometimes goes "on the water wagon" for varying periods of time.

It is unquestionably true that too much alcohol is bad mentally for any of us, even though we may have very strong and capable minds. This is generally known and accepted. It is equally true but not so generally known and appreciated that certain people should not take any alcohol at all.

MENTAL ALLERGY TO ALCOHOL: No doubt you have heard the saying, "One man's meat

is another man's poison". In a general way this means that what is good for one person may be harmful for another. Perhaps you have heard of one of the developments of modern medical science, the study of Allergy. It has been known for a long time that many people are extremely sensitive to the pollens of various plants and weeds like the pollens of golden rod or ragweed. Others are sensitive to horses or roses and dare not go near them. At a certain time of the year when in some places the air contains certain pollens, the victims of hay fever begin to sneeze, tears stream from their eyes, their faces may become puffed and swollen, they may have fever, and they are often quite sick and miserable. This is due to the fact that chemically they are very sensitive, or, in other words, "cannot stand" the pollens.

In the study of Allergy it was discovered that in much the same way, many people are sensitive to various foods and often to very ordinary, every-day foods, like butter or milk or potatoes or fish or it may involve any kind of food. When the person who is sensitive to some particular article of food, eats or drinks that food he is made very sick. Physicians can discover the foods to which a person is sensitive by a simple method of vaccinating him with the extracts of various foods.

Some people are sensitive or allergic to alcohol. Even more important than the fact that some individuals are chemically sensitive to alcohol in the

tissues of their bodies is the fact that some men and women "cannot stand" alcohol mentally. They are so constituted that alcohol, and sometimes in small quantities, "does things" and very serious things to their minds and to their personalities. In other words, they are mentally sensitive or allergic to alcohol. Now, there is nothing at all humiliating or disgraceful about this. It does not mean that there is any weakness of the mind. It is much like the person who cannot eat peas or fish or strawberries or something else without becoming sick and certainly no sensible person would think there was anything humiliating or disgraceful about that. Unfortunately there are no chemical tests or "vaccinations" by means of which we can detect whether a person is mentally sensitive or allergic to alcohol.

However, a great deal may be learned by observing the behavior of an individual when he is drinking. After all, there is some measure of truth in the old saying, "In vino veritas". In some sense it is true that the truth is in wine, and alcohol may lift the lids of our minds so that latent or hidden things reveal themselves. Naturally, there are difficult and unpleasant traits in all of us. Usually, they are kept beneath the surface and are so carefully checked and under control, that we may scarcely realize that they are a part of us. In those who have a mental sensitiveness or allergy to alcohol, such traits are very likely to come quickly to the surface under its influence. This does not mean at all that these people

are in reality unpleasant, mean or dangerous in their characters. It simply means that on account of the mental allergy, alcohol brings to the surface and releases certain types of behavior which, though they exist in most people, yet, do not display themselves excepting rarely under great provocation.

Probably you know someone who, when he has had too much alcohol, always wants to fight. There are people who, under the influence of even moderate amounts of alcohol, become aggressive, pugnacious and even dangerous. Without alcohol, these same individuals are often well behaved and even pleasant but, apparently, they have such a marked emotional allergy to alcohol that, under its influence, they act as though everyone in the environment were hostile and inimical toward them. There was, in my practice, a man who became dangerous after imbibing even small quantities of alcohol. Finally, in one of these states he committed a murder.

Less dangerous but equally unpleasant is that form of alcoholic allergy in which the individual becomes sullen and anti-social. No doubt, you have been present at some social occasion at which the whole party was spoiled by the rude and insulting behavior of one of the guests after he had taken a few drinks.

Another reaction is indicated by the fact that certain drinkers, even though their drinking may not be excessive, tend to retire into a deep and brooding melancholia. It is difficult to understand why this

group of people wants to drink at all, since, at least as far as can be observed, the drinking does not produce light-heartedness or any ability to enter into the fun, but, only an enveloping gloom which sets the individual apart from the social gayety.

These are but a few of the behavior reactions that indicate a mental or emotional incompatibility with alcohol. The normal, social function of alcohol is to promote relaxation and a feeling of good fellowship. In a general way, we may say that when the behavior of any individual under the influence of alcohol strikes too discordant a note, then there is something in the make-up of that person which does not mix well with alcohol and he had better leave it alone.

SAFE DRINKING AND DANGEROUS DRINKING: There has been a great deal of discussion as to what constitutes normal drinking and what constitutes abnormal drinking. In the first place, normal drinking is social drinking. Alcohol has a social usage which is to make reality more enjoyable. "Life is not all beer and skittles." As every intelligent, adult human being knows, it cannot be all pleasure and happiness. It is fortunate that this cannot be, for life would soon become unutterably boring and we would miss the joys of compensation. Real everyday existence has along with its joys, many irritations, rough edges and heavy burdens. Alcohol sensibly used, well diluted

with social intercourse and not taken to excess tends to minimize some of the irritations, smooth off some of the rough edges and, temporarily at least, ease some of the burdens. The normal, controlled, social drinker, however, remains in contact with reality and with his surroundings. He merely uses alcohol to relax a bit and to make reality a trifle more pleasant.

The chief difference between the normal drinker and the abnormal one, is that the first man drinks in moderation socially in order to make reality more pleasureable while the second man drinks in order to escape from reality. He cannot or will not face life. He is unwilling to partake in the great adventure of living with its joys and sorrows, its disappointments and its compensations. He finds in alcohol a source of unreality, of dangerous make believe, which protects him from "the stings and arrows of outrageous fortune." He is unwilling to take the bad along with the good and rather than run the risk of being hurt, he prefers not to live at all as other men live. Unfortunately, he does not see, until it is too late, that alcohol hurts him more in the long run, than he could possibly have been hurt by life and its experiences. He begins by using alcohol as a crutch to help himself over the rough places, but soon the crutch is more important than the help it gives. Unless he can be taught to stop drinking alcohol, he is lost.

DANGER SIGNALS: It is a serious thing to form the habit of using alcohol abnormally, instead of socially, but it is something that can be easily avoided. There are many danger signals and, if they are heeded, the calamity of abnormal drinking need never occur.

When a man begins to feel that he must habitually drink in the morning in order to recruit courage enough to get through the day, then he is in danger. Another time to stop and take stock of yourself, from the abnormal drinking angle, is if you find yourself taking a drink with regularity at intervals throughout the day. This is not so much a question of the amount of alcohol that is consumed, as it is of the fact that there seems to be almost an imperative demand, arising from within the individual to punctuate the routine of the day by a stated number of drinks.

Many abnormal drinkers are recruited from the ranks of normal, social drinkers. Therefore, any departure from the pleasant social ritual of drinking is to be viewed with suspicion. For instance, almost every man who drinks at all, occasionally takes a drink before lunch. However, when a man finds himself falling into the habit of having a drink before lunch every single day and feels that without it something necessary is lacking, then he may be well on the road to abnormal drinking. Again, when a man engaged in having a few drinks with friends, finds it necessary as the party begins to break up, to

hastily take a few drinks more than the others, in other words, to slip himself "a couple of quick ones," then, he, too, had better look out! Finally, when a man finds his social drinking becoming less and less important and his solitary drinking becoming more and more important, then he is surely in grave danger of becoming an abnormal drinker.

There is no absolute rule for the best and safest use of alcohol for each individual. But, if you want to safeguard yourself in this respect, review the history of your drinking from these four points:

1—In your frank judgment, and in the honest opinion of your friends, is your behavior under the influence of alcohol such that it would tend to let you believe that you are one of those who should not use alcohol?

2—Consider the history of your drinking. Is it at about the same level of moderate controlled drinking as it was in the beginning or has it increased and assumed dangerous proportions?

3—What do you gain by drinking? Is that gain something upon which you are dependent or could you manage your life satisfactorily without it?

4—Are you sure that you could stop drinking if you wanted to stop?

